

# Auroville Today

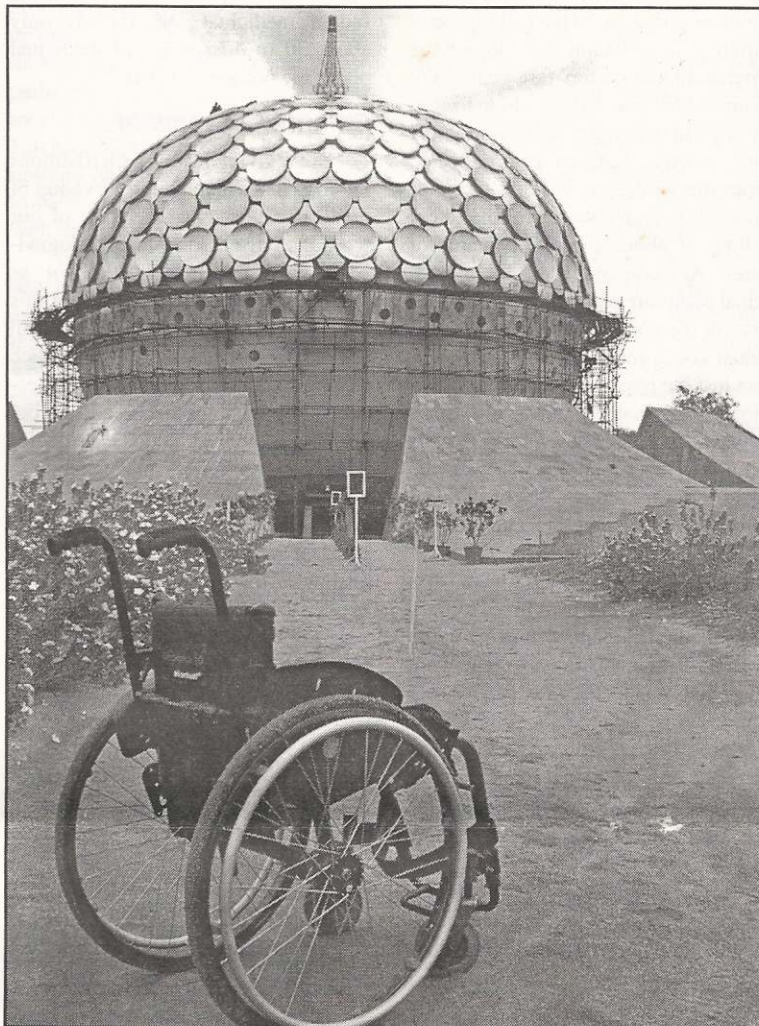
MAY 2001, No.148

## COVER STORY: A compassionate community?

- A caring society?
- The right of free access
- Caring at Quiet
- Out of the ordinary
- Supporting spiritual search
- Insuring health

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Today, the term 'community' is used in many different ways. However, its original meaning — "with gifts" or "bringing gifts" — implies a strong sense of interchange and mutual support within a well-defined social group. This aspect of caring continues to be a predominant motive for people joining intentional communities worldwide. Is Auroville such a 'caring community'? Do we, support each other? Could we be doing more? Here we offer some perspectives and ask some hard questions.



Matrimandir, the House of the Third Millennium, is not accessible for wheelchairs

## The right of free access

For those who do not have full physical mobility, such as the elderly or those needing a wheelchair, accessing public places in Auroville is an unpleasant challenge. There is as yet too little awareness in the community that this is unacceptable.

Freedom of movement is something that many of us take for granted. We jump on our bikes to get to where we need to go, and without a second thought move in and out of our home, work, and play spaces. The landscape we know as Auroville, however, can appear quite different if we do not have full physical mobility. For a person living in a wheelchair, or for an elderly person, accessing public places can be a daily challenge.

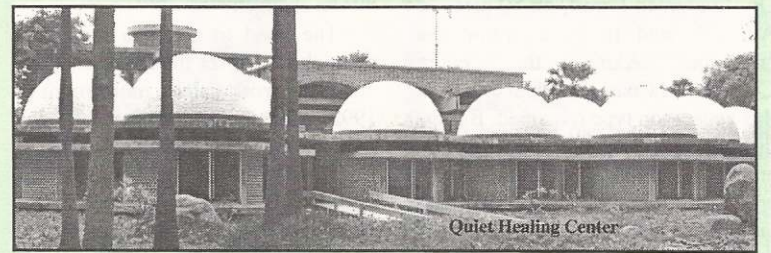
Let's say that in the morning you want to go to the post office. The stairs at this Bharat Nivas facility would make that errand into a real task, and one that would obligate you to involve others. If after that you want to pop over to the Boutique in the Visitors' Center you may feel doubly frustrated as your shopping could be easy were it not for the couple of steps between you and the shop. Let's say by now its time for

you to head over to Pour Tous. You can enter the store, but the aisles are so narrow that it is next to impossible to manoeuvre your chair. If you'd like to stop and have a juice at the snack bar, you could get put off by the extreme grade of the ramp that stands in your way. By now it's time for lunch. New Creation Corner? Hmm, more steps. Maybe you prefer the Solar Kitchen and that's a good thing because the Kitchen is really a friendly, manageable space, with the exception of the bathrooms, which are not at all user-friendly. And of course, you won't be joining anyone for coffee afterwards upstairs in the Coffee Shop. As the afternoon draws to a close, it seems almost natural that you can't go and sit by the beach with all the sand around. But not so natural is the fact that you do not have ready access to Matrimandir. Maybe on some days you don't mind having to ask the Matrimandir Group

to arrange for four attendants to carry you up and down in the special chair kept on hand for such occasions. But at other times, maybe you really resent not being able to just go by yourself and meditate as long as you like, without having to worry that some people are waiting to carry you down again.

Until now the Auroville community has lived largely unaware of the problems that failure to provide proper handicapped access can imply for those living with disabilities. A common excuse offered is that so far no Aurovilians have such needs. For anyone in the world who has met with an accident, however, and knows first hand how the limitations of one's body can change from one second to the next, and even for those of us who have had to live temporarily with restricting injuries, the flimsiness of such justifications is obvious.

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## A caring society?

Some visitors don't find much evidence of community in Auroville. They are referring to an almost total absence of community-wide celebrations, the fact that we don't have shared spiritual practices, that there is a certain brusqueness in many of our interactions, that there are major inequalities ...

All this is true. But Aurovilians will also tell you that it's by no means the whole story. For there is another level at which there is a strong sense of belonging, of family, but that this is often not expressed in an obvious way — pioneer minimalism and a pervasive distrust of openly-expressed emotion still exert their influence. In fact, it is often only in extreme situations that caring manifests overtly.

This is the personal level. But even at an institutional level, there are more community support systems in place today than there were ten years ago. Aurovilians can avail themselves of a wide range of health and healing therapies, the schools — though hampered by a lack of resources — provide genuine alternatives in educational approaches to all Auroville children, the new economy is already providing more support to Aurovilians with limited financial means, there is a job service, a counselling service, free workshops and cultural programmes. And, of course, we now have social gathering points like the Solar Kitchen and the Coffee Shop which may be vastly influential in their subtle influences upon the web of our relationships (it's difficult to remain angry with someone who buys you a cappuccino ice-cream).

### The failings

But the question remains: to what extent do we as a community address the needs of all our members? Perhaps not so well as we would like to think. How otherwise can we account for the fact that, after 33 years, large sectors of our society, such as the youth, many Tamil Aurovilians and young mothers, feel that their voices are not heard and their needs neglected? That a society made up of thirty-three different nationalities still doesn't have a decent language laboratory, or even a translation service for its many non-English speaking residents? That we have yet to evolve appeal procedures for Aurovilians who feel they have been wronged, either in a personal altercation or in a dispute with the larger community? That the community provides no health insurance to all its members? That only recently

we have begun providing a minimum of support to newcomers to facilitate their entry into the community? And what makes us neglectful of the needs of the aged and handicapped, fails to ensure that there is regular gynaecological assistance at the Health Centre and, at the most prosaic level, keep our roads un-signposted?

### Neo-Darwinian attitudes

It is easy to put all this down to a lack of resources. While there is a truth in this, there are also certain attitudes in the community which condition how we care, or do not care, for one another at the collective level. One such assumption is that we are not here primarily to look after each other, but to realize a new consciousness. That everything else, however praiseworthy in terms of conventional wisdom, morality or philanthropy, is a distraction from this aim. A concomitant is that Auroville itself is a test, a training-ground for the warriors of the new consciousness, and that nothing should be allowed to interfere with the process of the weeding-out of the unready and the tempering and shaping of the chosen.

### The path itself

This belief — the belief in the survival of the spiritually fittest — could be described as a kind of neo-Darwinian spirituality. Not that its proponents don't have a point. For Auroville is, above all, about contacting and embodying a new consciousness. Moreover, it is generally acknowledged that a genuine human unity is only possible when that consciousness is embodied in what Sri Aurobindo termed the 'gnostic collectivity'.

What may be challenged, however, is the unspoken assumption that all intermediate forms of community and sharing are deviations from this path, mere by-ways for sentimentalists. For the development of a caring society can become the path itself as long as we understand that caring, as we usually understand it, is not enough; that many other reaches of the spirit have to be discovered on the way to progressively deepening and enriching our relations with others.

Alan

**Pitchandikulam revitalises local health traditions**

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**Indian festivals through Aurovilians' eyes**

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# Pitchandikulam's work

## Reforestation and the revitalisation of local health traditions

Twenty seven years ago Pitchandikulam started the process of restoring the indigenous ecosystem, known as the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest, on 50 acres of Auroville land. It seemed a hopeless endeavor. Along the entire Coromandel Coast, less than 0.01% of this vegetation type remained. But the disaster was more than the loss of an entire vegetation. "We soon discovered," says Joss, "that the loss of vegetation went hand in hand with another loss: that of the medical and other traditional occupations that are dependent on this indigenous flora."

One of the first tasks was to do botanical surveys in the rare patches of indigenous forests that had often remained in the form of sacred groves. Says Joss: "Like any other re-afforestation project, we collected seeds and propagated and planted the indigenous forest types. And today Pitchandikulam has evolved into a self-generating forest ecosystem with more than 600 species of plants, and it has become a sanctuary for a wide range of fauna. That is satisfactory. But how were we to address that enormous task of revitalizing the local health traditions, and understanding what knowledge of the bio-resources still remained in the region surrounding Auroville?"

### Traditional healing systems

"We know that, even as per today, millions of people in villages, towns and cities across India depend on traditional medical systems. These traditions are under threat of becoming marginalised, not because in themselves they are medically inefficient, but because in addition to economic and political factors that favour allopathic healing systems, there is also an increased scarcity of plants. In India, an estimated 8,000 species of plants

are being used by local health practitioners for medicinal purposes, and it is safe to say that around 1,000 of these species are facing extinction. How can this be changed?"

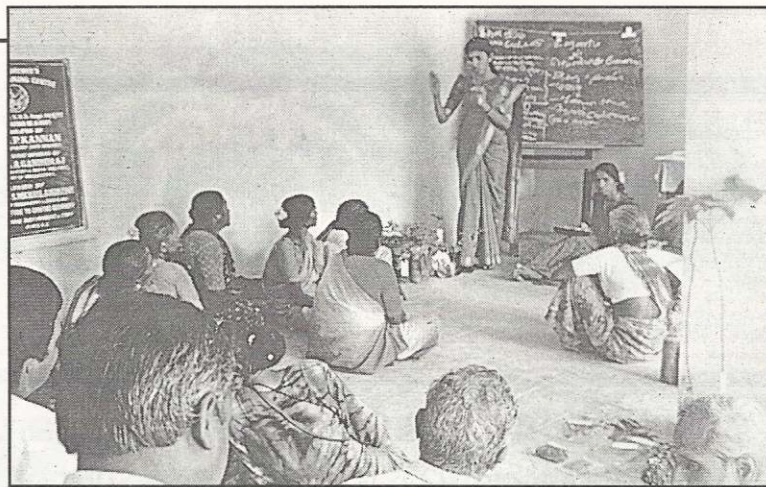
The need to create a medicinal plant check list for the area was obvious. This work gained momentum in 1992 with the involvement of the Indian Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions. This Foundation created a network of over 50 medicinal plant conservation sites

There are many specialized groups of *Nativaidyas*. Surveys show that the largest number are women, who are traditional birth attendants dealing with ante-natal and post-natal care and deliveries. The second largest group is the bonesetters who, it is estimated, deal with 50-60% of all bone fractures in the country. The 'Visha vaidyas,' who treat all kinds of poisonous bites, including those caused by cobras and vipers, are the third largest group of folk healers. Other specialisations are in treating chronic ailments like cirrhosis, life threatening diseases like cancer, and dealing with a wide variety of eye diseases including surgical removal of cataract. Most of the *Nativaidyas*, however, have crossed the age of 50 years, and have not been successful in passing their knowledge on to younger generations. A distinct lack of interest within the younger generation to take up this profession has been witnessed.

in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. In Auroville, the Pitchandikulam and Shakti communities were designated as conservation sites. At present, around 1500 species, of which 76 are red-listed (in imminent danger of extinction), are being conserved in these sites. The forest departments of the three states, as well as research institutes and non-governmental organizations, cooperate in this effort of plant conservation.

"Around 95% of the plants used by the Indian medical industry are collected from the wild, of which 70% involves unorganized harvesting," says Aramugam, a botanist who joined the Pitchandikulam team last year. "We estimate that over half a million tons of dry raw materials are indiscriminately and mostly destructively collected from the wild each year. In terms of area, this corresponds to the clear felling of about 165,000 hectares of forest. As a consequence, a lot of medicinal plants are endangered. Folk healers, on the contrary, have strict traditional codes for collection. They collect just the required quantity of medicinal plant material and only when needed. In some areas, when a plant is rare, they even leave a mark on the plant to inform colleagues of the date of collection, so that they can look for another one."

The Pitchandikulam team has meanwhile made its own list of indigenous medicinal plants that grow in the bio-region around Auroville. There are 515 plants on this list, of which 400 are known to be used by local healers in this area. "At present we are conducting tests at a medicinal plant training center which we have established for the Pondicherry Government. These tests will determine which of the commercially viable plants can be cultivated in this area and under what conditions," says Arumugam. "The chal-



Workshop on local health traditions involving Ayurvedic, Siddha, Unani and allopathic doctors with traditional *Nativaidyas* and householders

lenge is to grow medicinal plants as field crops in order to take the pressure off the wild. This would be of great interest to both local healers and the Indian medicinal industry, as only about 30 to 40 species of medicinal plants are being cultivated."

### Community registers

But reviving local health traditions requires more than the preservation of medical plants. "Another part of our work is to discuss local health knowledge with the healers (known as *Nativaidyas*) and householders of this region. Traditionally, Indians are well acquainted with herbal medicines, such as tumeric for cuts, ginger for indigestion, cloves for toothache and so on. The list is endless and the remedies have been practiced from generation to generation. The knowledge of these local health traditions is passed on by word of mouth. If the plants are not available, the knowledge gets lost," explains Ms. Shenbagam, a botanist who joined Pitchandikulam in 1997. Her work has been to collect this data and to create so-called community registers. "We have been visiting more than 30 villages in the last three years, and we have interviewed over 250 traditional healers, including specialists in bone setting, eye ailments, poisonous bites, traditional birth practices and cattle diseases. Their knowledge is not in a written form like other traditional healing systems of India such as the

*Siddha*, *Ayurvedic* or the *Unani*. What we have learned from them we have laid down in the community register we created for each village. In these registers we aim to document the entire traditional knowledge of village communities concerning the use, availability and conservation practices of its bio-resources (defined as any substance that is a part of or derived from either plant or animal). In this way, a register will not only establish the rights of these communities to use these bio-resources against attempts at patent them, but also be a means to revitalize traditional applications of the resources.

"This attempt has been well received. In the wake of creating community registers, we also initiated a number of awareness raising activities. They included the involvement of school children to bio-map their village and surroundings, visiting sacred groves and remnant forests with village children and folk healers, and selecting young healers from the families of traditional healers to receive regular training in herbal medicine, especially in primary health care aspects. These young healers then act as resource persons in other schools teaching herbal medicine preparations. In this way the communities become effectively involved with the efforts to revitalize and evolve the local plant-based healing practices."

Carel

## BUILDING THE CITY

# The city accelerates

Important new movements or dramatic accelerations of activity are often preceded by long periods of invisible preparation. This certainly seems to be the case with the city, for now there is an explosion of interest in urban activity.

As if to underline this, Monsieur Caillouet, Ambassador-Head of the European Delegation in India, visited Auroville last month to inaugurate construction of the Town Hall Annex, while the next day the Bharat Nivas group sponsored an all-Auroville workshop entitled 'City in the Making'.

Mr. Caillouet's visit was in connection with the decision of the European Union (E.U.) in June, 2000 to grant Auroville almost 2 crore rupees (\$ 435,000) in order to develop the city and the bioregion under the 'Asia Urbs' project. The 'Auroville Innovative Urban Management' project includes the elaboration of detailed development plans for the city with the help of town planners from Cologne and Venice. It also involves the hosting of international conferences on urban development in Auroville, and the training of local youth in areas like solar energy.

The Town Hall Annex, which will be situated just outside the outer gardens of Matrimandir in the present area of Bliss, has been allocated 55 lakhs (\$120,000) from this grant. After joining Aurovilians in the symbolic gesture of dropping pebbles into the concrete-mixer on site, Mr. Caillouet went to Aurofuture to listen

to a series of presentations on Auroville projects which will or may be funded by the European Union. "Auroville certainly knows how to access EU funds!" he expressed in some wonderment.

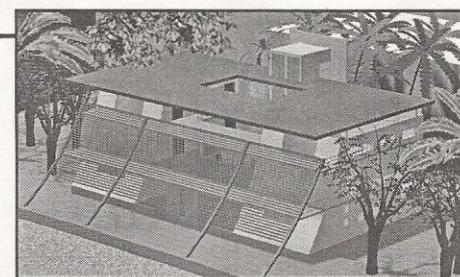
Later, during a short talk, he mentioned how the E.U. and India were growing closer again after a period of difficulties, and that there was a plan to strengthen contact between the civil societies of Europe and India through encouraging exchanges between universities, business and the media. He felt that Auroville could help promote such exchanges. Much of the subsequent discussion with the Aurovilians focussed upon the themes

of unity and diversity. It was observed, for example, that the kind of global unity sought by global corporations and media interests was a spurious unity as it suppressed rather than encouraged diversity. Mr. Caillouet agreed, noting that while the European Union is pursuing increased economic unity between its member states, it wants to preserve cultural diversity. He pointed out how the U.S. and Europe had different concepts of what constitutes art — "in the U.S. art means mass-entertainment, in Europe it is something more specialized and cultural" — and that this led to quite different views regarding the need to preserve and promote national

culture. In this context, he disagreed with the Aurovillian who felt that Auroville could be a site for consciously fostering a pan-European identity of the different European nations represented here, for he felt that such a larger identity may imply uniformity.

### City seminar

The next day over 100 Aurovilians crowded into the SAWCHU building for the 'City in the Making' workshop. The idea behind the workshop was not only to bring people up to date with the latest plans and developments, but also to stress the inner dimension of city planning and development. In other words, that the city needs to be an expression of an inner development in the community as much as of models and concepts imported from cities elsewhere. In this connection, Kireet Joshi, Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, began by restating Mother's intention in founding Auroville — that it is to be a place of accelerated evolution for the whole world — and reminding Aurovilians of the need to bear this in mind in whatever they do. Meenakshi then reported on a previous workshop during which representatives from the local villagers had been introduced to



Town Hall Annex drawing

the significance of Auroville by comparing it to some of the great cities of Tamil Nadu — Thanjavur, Madurai and Kanchipuram. The discussion which followed very quickly focussed upon the need for improved communication with the local villagers regarding our aims and intentions for development, and the idea of a 'mega-panchayat' comprising Aurovilians and villagers was once again mooted and supported.

The afternoon session emphasized more the bricks-and-mortar aspect of city development, with short presentations being given on plans for completing Bharat Nivas, for constructing the Unity Pavilion and the Pavilion of the Americas, and for completing collective housing developments like Prayatna, Creativity and the Line of Force.

During the final open session there was a discussion concerning what constitutes the essence of a city, and an Auroville architect suggested the forming of an informal city study circle as an opportunity for ideas to be shared about the city in a non-polemical environment. Nobody disagreed. It was that kind of workshop...

Alan

### The Town Hall Annex

The Town Hall Annex will be the first of a series of interconnected administrative buildings, which will include the future Town Hall. The Annex will contain offices for planning, engineering and architecture, a fully equipped conference room, several meeting rooms of different sizes, and a multimedia centre-cum-library on town planning and urban challenges in India, Asia and the world. Auroville Fund, the Financial Service, Land and Estate Management and the Land Fund have funded additional space to house their activities and the activities of other essential working groups like the Executive Committee, the Working Committee and the Development Group.

Anupama has designed a 1,100 square metre 2-storey building for the Annex. The construction is expected to take one year.



# "Find a way to empower youth!"

Nilauro, an Auroville youth now living abroad, shares his experiences and impressions

Young, energetic and affable, Nilauro was born in Auroville in 1972 and left when he was about 15 years old to pursue higher studies. For the past fourteen years, he has been visiting Auroville off and on. This year he visited Auroville as the new Executive Director of AVI-USA to acquaint himself with current developments in Auroville.

**AVT: What made you take up the job of the Executive Director of AVI-USA?**

**Nilauro:** Well, I was serving on the AVI-USA board, and suddenly AVI-USA became an important conduit for channeling funds to Auroville. Since 1998, AVI-USA received two large donations of shares, amounting to almost \$7,13,000, for buying land and building the USA Pavilion. It was clear that we could no longer continue to run AVI-USA on a voluntary part-time basis but needed to employ a full time Executive Director.

I had just graduated with a degree in Marine Biology. I knew I wanted a break from that subject but I hadn't made any fixed plans about the future. Knowing this, the other Board members offered me the job on a two-year contract.

I found the idea attractive but living in California, and given my computer skills, I was toying with the idea of joining Silicon Valley in the area of web design. That would have meant a lot more money, almost double what I was offered at the AVI USA. So really the question boiled down to: "Am I going to sell my soul to the computer industry, or am I going to do something which is in line with my Yoga and the things that I value?" It has been clear to me since years that I want to remain connected to Auroville and here was my chance to put my energy back into it.

**What are the changes that you see in Auroville?**

When I visited four years ago, I was disappointed in Auroville. I felt everything was stagnant. There was no experimentation, no marked direction in which the community was moving. Now, in the five weeks I have been here, I have attended a lot of meetings and community gatherings. While I will need some time to be able to

process it all, my general impression is very positive.

On my second day here, I went to the presentation of the new economic proposal. And I was touched by the harmony and consensus that I felt there. There must have been over a hundred Aurovilians, and they were all saying "yes" to this new proposed change. They were all willing to let go of their doubts and fears to experiment with something new. I found that extremely encouraging. I hadn't experienced such consensus and harmony in Auroville for a long while.

Then, of course, in the time I have been out, the Solar Kitchen has come up and, I find, with it a sense of community has come back. People whose paths wouldn't normally cross now meet each other at lunch. The Solar Kitchen, along with the Coffee Shop upstairs, has created a space for people to meet informally and keep in touch with one another.

And then there are other exciting new initiatives in building the city such as the Asia Urbs project, the Plaza and the American Pavilion, the last of which AVI-USA is involved in. Yes, things are on the move at Auroville.

On the flip side, I have the impression that Auroville has become more money-minded. Money rules your life from the time that you apply to join Auroville. Newcomers have to have enough money to build themselves houses, to contribute to the community etc. This creates the fear in them that they need to hold onto their money, to save every bit they have. I do not see the generosity that was there in the old days — giving freely to Auroville and letting the money flow. There are more new businesses being started, not for the joy of work, but because people want to have enough money to feel secure. The whole community has become more materialistic. Perhaps it was always that way and I hadn't noticed it before. I sincerely hope that the new economic initiatives will bring some much-needed changes.

And then, of course, the standard of living has gone up. There are better buildings, more choices in food. Now one can lead a completely Western lifestyle in Auroville. And I don't think that's a healthy sign. I don't see newcomers relating to the local conditions. I miss the simplicity of the old days.

**And yet, you remain open and connected to Auroville...**

Yes, it is hard to explain it. This place has something unique about it. It captures your heart. It is home, even though a lot of people that I grew up with have left Auroville.

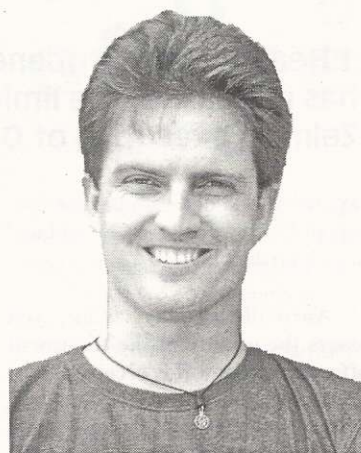
You realise how special Auroville is only when you are out of it. You know, one of the reasons why I left Auroville was that I didn't want to date any of my school-mates. We were such a small group and we grew up like brothers and sisters. I wanted to meet new people. But, somehow, I couldn't get really close to anybody out there. Even in intimate relationships with girl-friends, I felt that there was something missing, a closeness and an openness that we share here. I make friends more easily in Auroville. There is a heart connection with people here that I miss in the West. I think Aurovilians and friends of Auroville have a different perspective, a different way of looking at things, at the world. And it is hard to relate to people who don't share your view of things. At present I live with Aurotaranti, an Auroville woman who also grew up here!

**What was the best part of growing up in Auroville?**

The adventure of exploring this deserted countryside, of riding horses through wild grasslands. The sense of individuality. The freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. When I was growing up, schooling was encouraged but not insisted upon. And at a certain point in my early teens, I decided I wanted to study, I wanted to know more. So I made my own timetable and took classes in all the subjects that I wanted to study. That's both a positive and negative aspect to Auroville schooling. Since education is a choice left to the children, those who are motivated and disciplined do well, but those who aren't have trouble later in finding their place in society.

**What are your impressions of the Auroville youth?**

I am sad that they, at least not many of them, do not have a say in community matters. I think the older Aurovilians should somehow retire from important community posts. They have done an incredible job in building Auroville. But their time is



Nilauro

over. Auroville was built by young energy. And I feel it should always be that way. Otherwise as people grow old, they tend to seek stability, which of itself is fine, but stability soon degenerates to stagnation because people do not have the energy any more to experiment.

It is hard for most Auroville youth to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood. You know, there is no ritual, no clear marker to indicate this transition, as there is in the West. There is no prom party. There are no signals from the parents or the community that it is time for the youth to move out of the house and make their own way into society. So Auroville youth never learn to assume the responsibilities of adulthood.

We should somehow find a way to empower our youth. Otherwise, it is only the determined and assertive few that will try to find their place in the organizational set-up. Most Auroville youth that go out for their education, and then come back, make a positive contribution to the community.

I remember what Dan Greenberg, a member of the Sirius Community, USA, once said to me. He had been studying intentional communities all over the world, and he said Auroville was unique in that its children always came back to the live in the community or remained connected to it. In other communities, the children usually rebelled against their parents' choice for community life and left, never to come back. So I guess Auroville is on the right track if it continues to attract its youth back to their home.

*From an interview by Bindu*

## In brief

### • Art for Land

Aurovillian artists, Pierre Le Grand, Chantal Gowa and Mayaura, who are well known in India and Europe have donated some of their paintings to the Land Fund to be used for raising funds. Marika Popovitz, an artist and a regular visitor from USA also mounted an exhibition of her recent paintings titled "Portals of Peace" at Verite to benefit the fund-raising efforts of the Land Fund.

### • Udumbu

An isolated piece of land in the Green Belt has recently been taken up by Steve and Sydo for stewardship and afforestation. The land, comprising about 8 acres, has been named Udumbu referring to the Tamil expression "udumbu poodi", which means, "to grip very tightly". It originated in the old days when people would tie a rope around a monitor lizard and throw it up on fortress walls. The monitor lizard ("udumbu") would grab on to some crevasse. The name symbolizes strong determination and a healthy environment. Steve and Sydo have put in basic infrastructure for a settlement run by solar energy, and plan to recreate an indigenous patch of forest on the land.

### • Ralph Bunche

Film maker William Greaves and his wife Louise, long term friends of Auroville, presented Greaves's documentary "Ralph Bunche - An American Odyssey" about the life and historic achievements of Dr. Ralph Johnson Bunche (1903-1971), a black American who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for his work in creating peace between Israel, Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

### • End of season performances

With the schools closing at the end of April, and many Aurovilians preparing for summer leave, a number of end of season performances were given. The Children's Choir sang in Pitanga and Salle Auropax, the adults choir followed with a concert of renaissance and other music, and there was a Jazz event starring Eliane, vocals; Matt, piano and Rolf on electric bass guitar.

### • Steps

Cornelius exhibited his stainless steel sculptures, entitled "Steps", in the garden of Pitanga.

### • Letting the Body Create

Grace and Romeck offered an unusual dance workshop that combined both dance movement and painting. Working in pairs, participants explored the sensations in their bodies and translated their movements into collective paintings.

### • A little occult mischief

Due to a technical mistake, the April issue of Auroville Today was printed too lightly. However, it brought a smile to the lips of all those who have been working on the concept of the Aurore, as its symbol which was printed on page 1 was visible in the flame of the bonfire photo printed on page 2. Writes Olivier: "This is an absolute mystical deed, truly bearing Her mighty smile, especially if you know that, as a little occult mischief, I buried all the working notes of the Economy 2001 seminar in the woodpile of the bonfire as an offering and prayer to Her all embracing work."

## MATRIMANDIR

# Glass for the skin

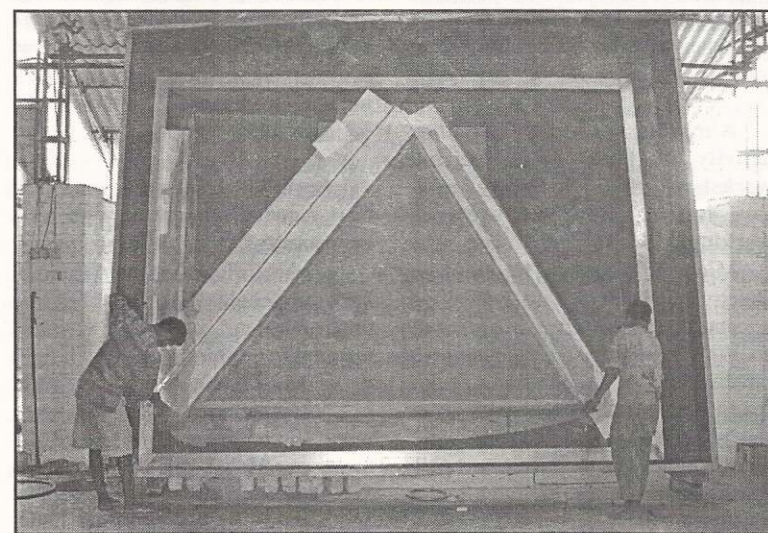
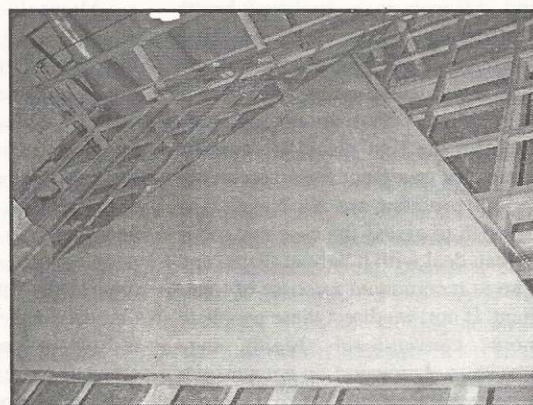
For some time now test pieces have been made for the inner skin glass panels. The first small samples were fired in the specially-built kiln at Matrimandir to find the right colour and texture for the glass. Last year the large triangles for the inner skin panels were coloured and fired (see also AVToday no.137). All went well until last December, when the colour of the glass coming out of the kiln changed from a deep salmon orange to a not-unpleasant mint green. Some people like that colour, but it was not what Mother had in mind. What had gone wrong? Some of the colour research had been done in Germany in an electric oven, while at Matrimandir a gas oven is being used. Luckily some of the Auroville potters could help out as they have had similar problems with firing orange colours. It seems that when there is too much fire inside the kiln, too much carbon dioxide is released and orange turns green. That problem was solved, the glass panels are coming out orange again.

But still Jürgen, who is in charge of this workshop, is not quite happy with

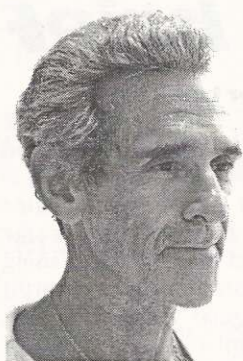
the end product. "Here at Matrimandir we try to achieve perfection. 'Kneading matter' demands a lot of attention to details. This means a physical presence on the site all the time. We are putting up 13 panels of this inner skin to see how it looks. They are being fitted in temporary steel frames until the aluminium profiles, which are being specially produced in Europe, have arrived. Then we will do the final fixing. Only then can we see how it looks." Once all the glass triangles are in place, the next challenges to be solved will be how to fix a lighting system behind the glass, and to find a way to keep the glass clean. As for the workshop, several things have to be organised before the production of the nearly 800 glass panels can start. A dust-free silk-screening room will have to be built, a system for unloading the huge glass sheets has to be constructed, and a way of transporting the ready panels into the Matrimandir will have to be designed and produced. Jürgen thinks that the entire job will take up to three years. "And I will need lots of help!"

*Tineke*

While a freshly silk-screened triangular piece of glass (right) waits to be moved to the oven where the paint will be fused to the glass, the huge silk screen (bottom) is cleaned







## Caring at Quiet

The Quiet Healing Centre opened a few years ago. While the number of therapies offered has increased, the limits of growth seem to have been reached. Michael Zelnick, executive of Quiet, explains.

**M**ichael: From day one Quiet's brief has been to provide alternative health care service to Aurovilians and members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram on a free basis. And that's what we have been doing ever since. Slightly over a hundred Aurovilians come to Quiet each week, on average 3 Aurovilians a day per therapist.

We cover our expenses by charging non-Aurovilians and non-Ashramites for the therapies and for the accommodation we offer in our two guesthouses. Quiet does not ask for nor receive any financial support from Auroville's Central Fund, nor does it contribute financially to the Central Fund. Our contribution to the community is through providing free alternative health care services.

The number of therapies offered here has steadily increased, and we would love to be able to offer more. But there are economic limitations. I think we are now pretty close to the maximum income we can generate, as it is largely determined by the climate which limits the length of our season from around mid-December through March, and by the lack of a reliable electricity supply which means that we cannot provide air-conditioned rooms. Given these factors it's hard to see how we can substantially increase our present income.

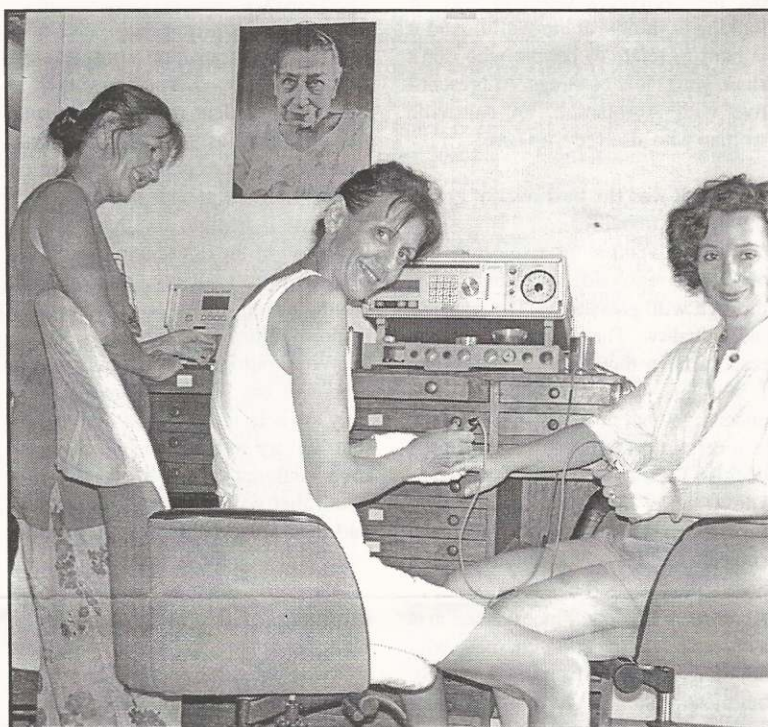
As a consequence, we have to decline the frequent offers we get from all kinds of therapists who would like to come and work at Quiet. We can offer to feed them, but cannot offer a salary or accommodations.

Sometimes the financial limitations put us into rather weird situations. Afsaneh, for example, needs two assistants to continue the highly popular bio-resonance therapy (she is booked solid for 2 months in advance). Her present assistants, who have been giving their service freely, are both leaving Auroville. If this treatment is to continue to be available Quiet has to come up with Rs 10,000 a month for two new assistants. We can't generate this money treating guests, as the bio-resonance therapy generally takes some months, while the guests are usually here only for a couple of weeks. So we have a therapy we believe in and that Aurovilians believe in, but we cannot support it. Should we say that Aurovilians have to pay? We really do not want to go that route. So do we

say: sorry, and discontinue bio-resonance? Or do we ask the Central Fund to pick up the bill?

**Auroville Today: Can you assess the quality of the treatment offered, and how it is received?**

Michael: On the whole, I believe, the quality offered at Quiet is quite good. Certainly the feedback we get is, almost without exception, very positive. Guests commend us for providing high quality services and often say they can't get such care elsewhere even at Western prices. Aurovilians (who tend to discount things they get for free) are for the most part equally positive.



From left to right: Agnes, Afsaneh and Anna at the biocom machine which "reads" the electro-magnetic vibrations emitted by the cells of a patient's body. If these vibrations are read as 'disharmonious', the machine transmits harmonious vibrations. The therapist's task is to make an energy diagnosis.

We sometimes get a question about the qualifications of our team members. Only two of the twelve therapists working at Quiet hold medical or quasi-medical degrees. Dr. Nandita is an accredited homeopath, and Afsaneh is a qualified health practitioner from Germany. But 'establishment' credentials are not very much to the point here. People searching for that do not come to Quiet in the first place. If someone comes for treatment for a potentially serious problem, we ask Nandita, or Afsaneh to assess the case and see if we can deal with it here at Quiet, and if so to recommend a course of treatment. If not, we direct these people to more conventional health care providers. Anyway, I do not consider degrees very essential. Our therapist improve their skills as they go along and when possible go out for further training.

**Auroville Today: Another activity of Quiet is organizing workshops on alternative health care systems. How well are they working?**

Michael: In a recent meeting, the Quiet group took stock of where we are and discussed where we want to go. We have demonstrated to our own satisfaction that we can run a health spa successfully. So then what? There was a general consensus that we'd like to increase our efforts to bring world-class speakers to Quiet. Quiet organised a very successful interna-

tional homeopathic conference four years ago which brought several top people from that field to Auroville. There have been a couple of smaller events since then. Last year we hosted Dr. Dobrea, one of the big names in bio-resonance, and in January this year there was Jasmuheen. These workshops as a rule are very well attended and appreciated. But again, there are the financial limitations. On the income we generate, we cannot pay people's air fare to come here. We hope that a future grant will make this possible.

By the way, we offer these workshops for educational purposes. The fact that Quiet organizes them does

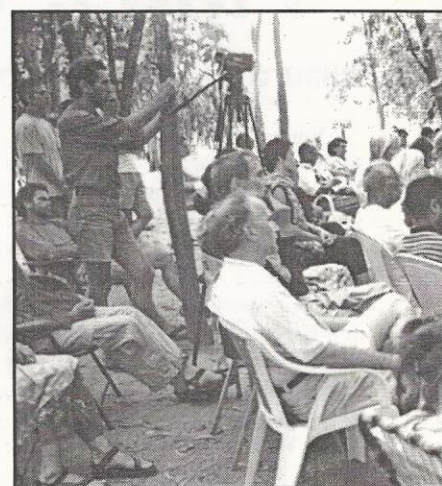
there was always a tangible feeling of family, of all being Mother's children, of all being gurbhais. That feeling I never had in Auroville.

Of course, Auroville is a much more diverse community than the Ashram. You have people here for lots of reasons, not all spiritual ones, and as Auroville is not a religious organization, that is OK. But the result is that here you have people who are devoted to Mother and Sri Aurobindo and aspire to do a conscious sadhana working side by side with people who are here because they are interested in greenwork or alternative energy or whatever. Then it is more difficult to sustain the feeling that we are all brothers and sisters, interrelated on a very profound and meaningful level. If we are, it is more difficult to access. And as the community grows, and we see more people on the road whom we do not know, it is empty to talk about brotherhood, except, of course, in a very abstract sense.

I believe that the true collective can only manifest as a result of Aurovilians' heart contact with the Mother. Meetings, the famous "collective process," the availability of free services — they all don't have much to do with it.

*Carel*

*Michael is from the USA. He holds a BA in English literature and an MA in comparative literature. He lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram from 1968 till 1979, when he joined Auroville. He left Auroville in 1982, returned in 1993 and joined Quiet as administrative manager. He also practices homeopathy.*



Aurovilians and members of the

## Supporting

How much support does the traditions of Auroville and the n

**M**other stressed that it was important that the Aurovilians have a good knowledge of the writings of Sri Aurobindo. Consequently, in the early years certain Ashramites — including M.P.Pandit, Amal Kiran, Nirodbaran, Aravinda Basu and Udar Pinto — came regularly to Auroville to speak about Sri Aurobindo and Mother. The talks, which were held in venues like Last School amphitheatre and the Matrimandir Camp, were well-attended and lively. However, in 1979 they stopped. Why?

Most obviously it was because of increasing difficulties with the Sri Aurobindo Society (S.A.S.) and the Ashram. Some of the Aurovilians wanted to break links with the Ashram because they felt it had 'betrayed' Auroville by not supporting it in its struggles against the S.A.S., and because it was believed to be victimising Satprem for his efforts to publish The Agenda. As more and more of

## Out of the ordinary

Coming to Auroville is for each and every body a huge way of life. And it does not matter whether you come from Buenos Aires or Paris. Perhaps the step from Kuilapa

**T**he motivation to step out of the usual way of life which is given to you in the place where you grow up, which educated you and where you were integrated, is multidimensional. There is an aspiration for something else, a desire to change your life, as well as a certain profound dissatisfaction with the way things are. The combination of these factors has to be strong to get someone to move out of the system. For it is not an easy step and also not usual, and therefore most people do not do it.

One of the reasons for taking such a step is not often observed: it is to take distance from the conventional family framework. This is true for Westerners and for Indians, even though the family ties are much looser in the West than those in India. The distance allows one to spin differently.

People come here with a lot of aspiration, input, and a high level of expectation. But after some time, usually after two or three years, they often encounter disappointments. Some people learn to cope with it. Others may leave Auroville and possibly come back later to give it another try.

The disappointment with the initial aspiration may be caused by various factors. There is often a discrepancy between the image and the expectations of oneself and the realities that manifest. Material insecurity can play

a role as well, although the lack of material possessions can also act as a liberation for some people. It depends on the nature of the general *gestalt* in which they have been living, in which particulars way their value system has been built. Another insecurity can be the lack of a proper status in India, for foreigners can be removed from one day to the other without the government having to give any reasons. But essentially these outer reasons will be reflections of inner insecurities with oneself or with Auroville. Taken by themselves, they are very rarely sufficient to make one leave Auroville.

Aurovilians deviate from the normal way of life, even though that 'normal way of life' is changing everywhere on the planet. For they wouldn't be motivated to go out of their way, break with their traditional lifestyles, if it was not to make progress. So there is a high percentage of people in Auroville who want to make progress, and are consequently very sensitive to their own limitations. On top of that, the parameters keep shifting farther away. One is never fully successful.

### Concentrating on the self

Necessarily, this brings a concentration on one's own development rather than on that of the collective. This concentration can become non-cooperative, or sometimes even com-

### Alternative health care offered at Quiet

Hatha Yoga  
Self healing and cellular consciousness  
Pranaerobics  
Aqua balancing  
Bio resonance  
Chiropractic  
Counselling  
Polarity therapy  
Pranic healing/crystal healing  
Ayurvedic massage  
Dance therapy  
Foot reflexology  
Homeopathy  
Hydrogen peroxide bath  
Deep tissue massage  
Relaxing massage  
Lymph drainage  
Under water massage  
Shiatsu





Sri Aurobindo Ashram came together in "Remembering the Mother" at Savitri Bhavan on January 28th, 2001

## ng spiritual search

community provide to those who want to understand the spiritual foundation of the integral yoga?

The *Agenda* was published, some of Mother's comments also appeared to support Satprem's assertion that the Ashram was "finished", and that Aurovilians had henceforth to walk their own spiritual path. Underlying this was the sense that the age of gurus and religions was over, that Mother had announced the birth of a new world which superseded all that went before, and that now one only needed to open oneself to and work with the force in order to progress.

This fitted well with the spirit of that time, for in Auroville it was a time of spontaneous action and of the rejection of established modes of thinking and authority ("too mental" was one of the devastating put-downs of that period). The Auroville schools remained shut (although a few small-scale educational experiments continued) and some of the books in the Auroville library were burned.

By the early 1980s, however, it was clear that there was a cost to this

radical clearing of the decks. Many children were receiving no education and, as the political situation stabilized and energy turned again towards building the township, it became evident that very few Aurovilians really understood what Mother had intended for the detailed organization of the community. There was also growing concern that not only Newcomers but also many Aurovilians lacked a basic understanding of the Integral Yoga and of the significance of Mother's intentions for Auroville.

Consequently, along with the re-establishment of formal education in 1984, there was a new movement of research and documentation. For example, one of the first tasks of the newly-established Laboratory of Evolution (LoE) was to make compilations of the texts of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on topics like Integral Yoga, the psychic being and the 'Avatar's Model Town'. It also built up a library which includes not only works of Sri Aurobindo, Mother and their followers, but also texts on related fields like the new physics and alternative approaches in health and healing. "In this way," explains Bhaga who coordinates activities at the Laboratory of Evolution, "the LoE has become a bridge between the yoga as practised in Auroville and what is happening regarding evolution in the larger world, about which we still know far too little." It's an approach which has had its critics, notably those who believe that the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Mother is unique and cannot be explained by or compared to any other path. There also remains a deep suspicion among some Aurovilians of what is perceived to be 'New Age' homogenization and superficiality. However Bhaga has seen a definite change in the past two years, with far more people coming to borrow books not only on the yoga but also on allied movements.

### A turning point

By the early 1990s the somewhat strained relationship between Auroville and the Ashram was beginning to ease. Crucially, the completion of the inner chamber of Matrimandir drew Ashramites to the structure which many had worked on in the early years. At the same time, the reintegration of the so-called 'neutrals' (Aurovilians who had favoured dialogue with the SAS without being of that party) back into the community also facilitated a greater interaction with Ashramites, for many of these Aurovilians had retained strong links with individual Ashramites.

The interactions, however, remained informal, and while senior Ashramites like Champaklal and Nirodbaran visited Matrimandir and Aurovillian friends, they did not give

talks. The turning-point came in 1994 when Nirodbaran was invited to Pitanga Hall to speak about his recollections of Sri Aurobindo. The deeply-felt and enthusiastic response of the Aurovilians to his talk made it obvious that there was a tremendous thirst not only for more knowledge, but also for increased contact with those who, like Nirodbaran, had had direct experience of Sri Aurobindo and Mother. 1994 was also the year the Savitri Study group began meeting regularly, and this was to become the seed of the Savitri Bhavan project.

Today there are regular well-attended classes and talks at Savitri Bhavan on 'Savitri', 'The Life Divine' and other works by Sri Aurobindo and Mother, given by both Aurovilians and Ashramites like Dr. Ananda Reddy, Dr. Nadkarni and Sraddhalu. The Welcoming Group, which organizes introduction weeks for Newcomers, always includes a session on the spiritual foundations of Auroville, while the Auroville Library, the Laboratory of Evolution and the House of Mother's Agenda continue to loan out books and tapes and mount mini-exhibitions on topics related to the yoga. There is even a new service which offers to make compilations on demand of any aspect of Auroville and the yoga.

In this sense one can say that the community is, once again, taking up the responsibility of disseminating knowledge about the yoga to all who are interested. However, important lacunae remain. Many of the local villagers who join Auroville are illiterate or semi-literate and have little or no knowledge of the yoga or the purpose of Auroville. This is not easily remedied as there are very few easy-to-read books in Tamil on the yoga (and the ones that do exist are not widely distributed) and there are no regular presentations on the yoga in the Tamil language.

Then, again, the larger question of how far one needs to study the yoga in order to become an effective instrument remains unresolved. One reason why there is not more widespread study in the community of Sri Aurobindo and Mother is that some Aurovilians seem to assume that merely to live in Auroville is to be on the royal road to transformation. Bhaga, who makes presentations to newcomers on the spiritual foundations of Auroville, sounds an additional note of caution. "We must beware of turning Sri Aurobindo and Mother into a religion. The world is not interested in us adoring something, but in our demonstrating that we are evolving. We need knowledge but, above all, we need to make it living."

Alan

## The right of free access

(continued from page 1)

Moreover, the number of older Aurovilians is increasing with time and their need for mobility will be an issue that the community cannot ignore.

It is perhaps a bit embarrassing that the problem of access should be illuminated by the presence of disabled guests to Auroville, rather than through the consciousness of Auroville residents. After all, many Aurovilians come from countries where significant efforts have been made in the past ten years to make public places and bathrooms available to everyone. Even in India, the need for "barrier-free architecture" is becoming more accepted, with institutions such as the Indian Institute of Architects establishing some basic guidelines.

The problem is neither lack of know-how, nor resources, as such fittings do not demand elaborate techniques or money. As Christel, a long-term guest who has been living in a wheelchair since she met with an accident some years ago, explains, "It's not that so much as to be done. The problem is for people to think about it". Christel has been visiting Auroville 5 months a year for the past six years and has always felt strongly that it is in the community's interest to consider the needs of people such as herself. "In the future, Auroville will become a city. Many more people will be coming here and living here. Some of them may be like me. There will also be older Aurovilians. And then, what about mothers with baby carriages!"

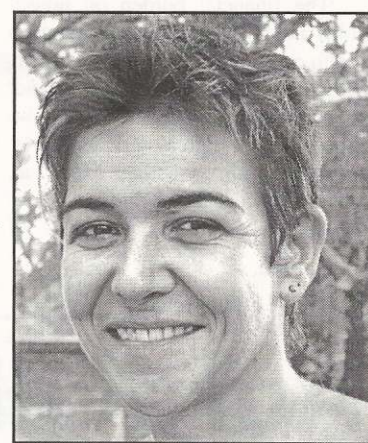
### Increase in awareness

Out of the strength of her convictions, Christel made a visit to the Development Group about three years ago. The initial reaction of the Group was one of embarrassment as they witnessed first hand the effort that Christel had to make just to enter their offices. Encouraged by the members' seeming willingness to take appropriate measures, on her return to France Christel sent the group complete documentation detailing the exact specifications for making public spaces and toilets accessible for the disabled. In the end nothing happened: the present members of the Development Group do not even know what became of the information provided by Christel. There is, however, more awareness of the need to begin to insist that architects and project holders take the necessary steps. Josebas of the Development Group confirms that, "When we approved projects in the past, we were not looking at these kinds of details. But now we realize that we must start doing so. For example, the proposed Town Hall and Plaza designs include wheelchair access ramps." Architect Anupama adds, "I would suggest that we create a budget specifically for rendering all our public buildings barrier-free."

But will the Development Group ensure that these ramps meet with the necessary specifications for width and degree of incline? Moreover, there is still the issue of ensuring that there are appropriate bathroom facilities. Until very exact guidelines are followed, it is not always clear if a building is indeed accessible. For example, while some contend that the new SAWCHU building is accessible from the back side, Christel asserts that it is impossible for someone in a wheelchair to enter the building

unassisted.

The failure to give adequate attention to this issue may stem in part from the attitude of some people in the community that physical disabilities are like illnesses, and that illnesses are somehow associated with spiritual weakness and an inability to make any effective contribution to society. In response to the first idea, that being handicapped is like being sick, Christel remembers a moment when someone commented to her that she could never think about becoming an Aurovillian, since Mother had said that she did not want "ill people" coming here. "But I am not ill!" was Christel's reply. "I am probably in better health than you!"



Christel

As for handicaps and spirituality, Christel reminds others that people like herself actually have much to impart. "In dealing with our situation and learning to walk again, people like myself are engaged in real research on the body and matter. Was this not the work of Mother herself? We work on our will, our faith and patience. In this way we have a very active inner life and so many things to give to others."

### A different perspective

In developing greater consciousness about handicapped people, however, it is important not to lump such individuals into one category and assume that they all feel similarly about their situation. Yuyu is another regular long-term guest to Auroville who has faced difficulties in moving himself with his wheelchair through the community. Whereas he agrees that handicapped access will become an increasing concern in Auroville as it continues to grow into a city, he is not entirely discouraged by the present situation. As someone who has learned to see the bright side of even the most difficult circumstances, Yuyu states that sometimes he does not mind asking people for assistance, because it becomes a chance to meet others. With a wry smile he adds, "I have even been carried in the arms of beautiful women!"

It is encouraging to note that Yuyu has found Aurovilians to be very ready to lend him a helping hand. "Sometimes in France, I wait 15 minutes in my car before I see someone looking friendly enough for me to ask them to help me out and into my chair. Here that's never the case." As such, Yuyu's experience would seem to confirm that when it comes to face-to-face interactions, many Aurovilians are quick to demonstrate their concern for others. The next step remains to translate that personal care into taking the appropriate actions at the collective level.

Shanti

ry

step out of the ordinary from Kuilapalayam, ayam is even bigger.

petitive. The individualistic trend also shows itself in a growing non-interest in public matters, such as participating in community working groups or matters regarding the 'polis' of Auroville in the ancient Greek sense of the word. There is a tendency to extend the criticism of oneself to others, which brings in a certain harsh judgmental attitude.

The individualistic development can also be responsible for a great deal of loneliness. The feeling of loneliness is most often not a day time, but an evening phenomenon. It has been argued that Auroville lacks facilities such as public spaces where we can ease loneliness, and that a certain amount of nightlife would be a good thing. Possibly, but I doubt if that would change the overall phenomenon. I have often seen that Aurovilians are uneasy about being together at social events. It is only rarely that a sense of togetherness comes forward. In that way life in Auroville reflects the dominant experience of being in the Matrimandir chamber. No matter how many people are gathered there, you are absolutely on your own.

Jehuda

Jehuda is a philosopher and psychologist from Germany. He and his Korean partner Jung joined Auroville in 1997 and are working as therapists.



# Covering Aurovilian's health costs

The majority of Aurovilians have no health insurance. But the costs of hospitalization can be excessive, as has been testified in a number of cases. What is being done about it? So far, not much.

India's public health care system, which aims at providing free or subsidized 'Health for All,' is known to be under severe financial constraints. Public hospitals are understaffed, underfunded and the treatment provided can consequently be of poor quality. The huge demand has even led to access problems for the very poor, forcing them to visit private hospitals or clinics and accept more expensive treatments. Those who are admitted to public hospitals still have to meet many incidental expenses that are not provided freely. Even patients from the lowest income groups often pay considerable amounts for medicines, laboratory tests, dressings, linen and food, and sometimes also for treatment itself. The higher income groups tend to avoid public health services if possible, and go to private clinics instead.

The financial burden on households and individuals to cover sudden health care expenses can be excessive, particularly for individuals who are not or not adequately insured yet who expect the best treatment available. Aurovilians, almost without exception, fall into this category.

This is not to say that all

Aurovilians lack coverage for health costs. For the 300 or so Aurovilians who depend on the community for their monthly maintenance, Rs 175 per person per month is set aside in an internal health care fund, which is administered by the Health Care Group. This fund aims at covering all medical expenses of these Aurovilians, both those connected with hospitalization as well as out-patient care. In order to minimise the costs of hospitalization, the members of the Health Care Group sometimes prescribe the choice of hospital. They also check all medical bills that are submitted. It will therefore come as no surprise that the experience of working for the Health Care Group has not been enjoyable, as they are subject to a lot of psychological pressure.

The majority of the Aurovilians, that is all those who are not or only partially dependent on a community maintenance, have so far been left to their own devices to find a means to avoid or reduce unexpected health service expenditure. The costs of hospitalisation nearly always take the lion's share of these expenses. Though still low in comparison with hospitals in Europe or

the USA, the costs of hospitalisation are nevertheless on the increase in India. Open heart surgery recently cost an Aurovilian approximately Rs 3 lakhs (US \$ 6,500); an Aurovilian who needed a hip replacement had to pay over Rs 1.2 lakh (US\$ 2,600); a hernia operation cost Rs 1 lakh (US \$ 2,200). There are many more instances where Aurovilians, faced with a sudden high expenditure for health care, ended up paying from their private resources. None of them were insured. Why?

One of the reasons is that most Aurovilians are unaware of the possibilities of having a health insurance. But they do exist in India. The Indian General Insurance Corporation, set up by the government as a public sector undertaking to market a wide range of insurance services, has introduced the 'Mediclinic' health insurance scheme, which is now available from most Indian insurance companies. The standard policy covers only the reimbursement of hospitalisation and related expenses. It does not cover any out-patient care and has, as does any insurance, a number of exclusions. The premium differs for various age groups, but is relatively low. For an insured

sum of Rs 2 lakhs ((US \$ 4,300) the yearly premium for someone in the age group between 45-55 years is about Rs 3,000. (US\$ 65). As India has recently opened its insurance market to the private sector, it is expected that soon more companies will offer health insurance.

While many individual Aurovilians are not aware of the existence of health insurance in India, the Economy Group certainly was. As early as June, 1998, its attention was called to the possibility of taking out a collective Mediclinic insurance for all Aurovilians. However, the Economy Group never followed up on this. Instead, some of its members expressed a preference to cover all medical expenses of all Aurovilians and newcomers through an internal fund, rather than 'going outside.'

A recent development is that the Health Care Group, after studying the implications of this preference, has concluded that this move would most probably be financially unfeasible for Auroville (the community, with only 1500 members, is judged by experts as 'too small' for an internal health insurance system and there is an aging pop-

ulation) and would also place too heavy a burden on the members of the Health Care Group as their work would more than double. Instead of fully covering all medical expenses internally, the Health Care group has now proposed that Auroville goes for a mixed system, e.g. a collective health insurance from outside, together with an in-house Health Care Fund. The latter would then cover any costs exceeding the health insurance coverage plus the costs of out-patient care. The proposal has the advantage that a major part, if not all of the costs of hospital treatment — which are the major health care costs — would be covered by the insurance. Since the insurance allows the individual a free choice of hospital anywhere in India, it has the additional advantage that the individual can make his/her own choice of hospital and choose what he or she perceives as the best treatment available, instead of burdening the Health Care Group with making an impossible decision.

It is hoped that a decision will be taken soon. For those not presently insured, such a decision is long overdue. *Carel*

## RESEARCH

# Auroville as a complex living system

Visitor Eileen Conn introduced Aurovilians to Complexity Theory as a new way to understand the community

The subversive thing about paradigms — seminal ideas which influence how we view the world and ourselves — is that, generally, we are unaware of them. Only when there is a major paradigm shift — as when, for example, Copernicus postulated that the earth circles the sun rather than vice versa — do we become aware of how much our inherited perception of things is partial, or even erroneous.

One of the most influential paradigms of the past few centuries has been that of 'machine thinking'. The mechanical paradigm assumes that something can be understood by reducing it to its parts and then learning how each part works. This works fine for machines. However, this paradigm has been applied ever more widely to areas where the mechanical approach makes no sense. For example, the mechanical paradigm is totally unfit for dealing with living systems, for such systems cannot be taken apart and reassembled, but are fluid, adaptable, able to learn and ultimately unpredictable. Above all, the totality of a living being is far more than the sum of its parts.

Recently, a new paradigm has emerged. Complexity Theory seeks to understand (amongst other things) how order seems to emerge out of 'chaos' without the need for outside interventions or an internal control mechanism. Complexity Theory is now most widely used by economists and management theorists in an attempt to understand the workings of the global economy. However, as Eileen Conn, a lecturer at The London School of Economics, pointed out recently, Complexity Theory is also very suited to studying complex living systems like Auroville.

Eileen spent eight weeks viewing Auroville through the lens of Complexity Theory, at the end of which she gave a presentation to interested Aurovilians. She began by explaining some important concepts of Complexity Theory as applied to living systems. One of these was the concept of the social ecosystem. Any society is made up of many types of entities and

groupings. Each of these have their own styles and patterns of thought and working which, like the constituents of a biological organism, are constantly jostling against and influencing each other through myriad interactions. The



Eileen Conn

effect of these interrelations over time is the appearance of stable configurations or behaviour patterns known as 'strange attractors'. (Snowflakes are one example of naturally occurring 'strange attractors'. The hexagonal shape is constant for all snowflakes, yet each snowflake has a unique form generated by specific environmental conditions.) Similar patterns can also be discerned at the individual, group and whole society level. These are like 'fractals', patterns which repeat themselves at all scales from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. Thus, divisions within an individual will be mirrored at all the other levels of the community.

Another key concept of the emerging science of Complexity Theory is that of 'structural coupling'. Post-Darwinian theory postulates that organisms adapt to their environment, but a Chilean professor of neurobiology found this far too simplistic. His studies led him to conclude that an organism responds to its environment through an internal 'patterning' which causes it to filter out some aspects of its environment and pay attention to others. In other words, an organism 'creates its own world'. However, if two organisms with different internal pat-

ternings are in close relationship over a period of time their patterns will begin to adjust to each other, and eventually they will 'couple' or resonate in the same way.

## The Auroville perspective

Some time before her presentation, Eileen distributed a paper by an academic, Alison Gilchrist, which Eileen felt was a good Complexity Theory description of how Auroville 'works'. "...an optimal community is one which is able to adapt effectively to external changes and to sustain its own forms of collective organization and governance. This state is achieved when a system reaches or maintains itself at the 'edge of chaos' (an intermediate state between rigidity and total instability), with micro-rules of interaction generating order at the macro level. Systems operating at the edge of chaos are excellent information-processors and highly creative. They are sensitive to slight changes in external conditions and internal events, and generate innovative responses to these which adapt or evolve to suit the current environment." However, Eileen felt that Auroville could do more in the area of communication, which is crucial to such an optimal system developing and maintaining itself ("The probability of successful forms of collective organization developing is increased if members are 'well-connected'...members of a 'well-connected' community are able to communicate easily and openly with one another, tolerate and learn from different perspectives.").

The concept of internal patternings, for example, is a crucial one to look at in a community which contains so many nationalities. For, as Eileen pointed out, people with different mother tongues have very different internal patterns, and these make them view and respond to the world in quite different ways. Thus, in terms of conflict resolution or even ordinary dialogue, it's extremely important that one tries to understand the internal patterns of whoever one is in conflict or dialoguing with. Eileen was surprised at

how little work the community seems to have done around this, and suggested we should experiment with techniques, like Bohmian Dialogue, which are specifically designed to reveal these internal patterns.

But perhaps the most powerful message of Complexity Theory to a place like Auroville is that blueprints don't work. In other words, while one can make plans it is impossible to predict or control the outcome. In complex living systems, new directions emerge dynamically from a complex of factors and interactions: they cannot be imposed. The need, then, is to attempt to create conditions which will encourage such emergence. These include efficient networking of information, the abolition of fixed hierarchies, an openness to new ideas, and extreme flexibility regarding the possible paths to be taken. As two sociologists

describe it, "the more that people interact with others and the greater the diversity of the experiences that are brought to these interactions, the higher is the probability of a 'critical mass' of collaborators emerging to produce innovative and successful projects." Eileen held up the recent seminars on the Auroville economy as a model in this respect.

Complexity Theory provides us with another tool with which we can choose to work. It won't give us all the answers (it does not appear to take account of the spiritual dimension, for example), but if it does no more than make us aware of the fallacies of mechanistic thinking, as well as the need to encourage multiple interactions and diversity of thought as conditions for creative emergence, it will already have done us a great service. *Alan*

## SPORTS

Fuzzy Navel won the recent Auroville football championship by beating Lemon Twist 1-0 in the final. Almost 100 people participated in this championship, which is now

the games were played in a good spirit — nobody was sent off or hospitalized, and the spectators were good-naturedly vociferous in their sideline comments.



becoming an annual event. Eight teams took part, divided into two leagues. The winners and runners-up in each league then proceeded to the knock-out stages of the semi-finals and finals. The football itself was marked more by enthusiasm than finely honed skills, the passing was speculative rather than incisive, the game plans well hidden, yet aficionados swore that the standard was higher this year than last. Certainly

Samya, who helped organize the tournament, hopes that enough players will now come forward to make regular coaching worthwhile. Auroville has already played teams in Pondicherry with some success (we demolished the Lycee Francaise 6-2 recently), and an Auroville team which trains regularly could prove, well, irresistible. Now all that's needed is a fat-cat sponsor...

*Alan*



## Ringing in the New Year

The fourteenth of April, the first day of the Tamil New Year, proved to be an occasion for a community celebration

Young dancers and Tamil actors got together to put on a widely varied performance on the stage of the Visitors' Reception Centre. The diversity of the dances, the costumes, and music were a compliment to the cultural richness that Auroville embodies. Young children showed their progress in studying the classical Bharat Natyam and Odissi dance forms and other folk dances from India, such as a stick dance from Gujarat. Others exhibited snatches of ballet in twirling coloured scarves, but lacked the maturity of the Tamil and Odissi students. Yet another group danced to jazz rhythms. It did not go unnoticed that Indian children were performing Indian dances while the ballet and jazz performers were almost solely Westerners. Between the dances there were short skits by young Tamil Aurovilians, ridiculing aspects of Auroville's organization, "merely repeating on stage comments that had actually been made by various working groups" as they later asserted. Whatever the case may be, it drove home the point that young Tamil men would like to have their voice heard in the community.

Visiting Geo students staged a self-choreographed modern dance, "Re-evolution", on a text by environmentalist Joanna Macy. While this was different from the Aurovillian fare it was appropriate to Auroville's ideals.

Bindu



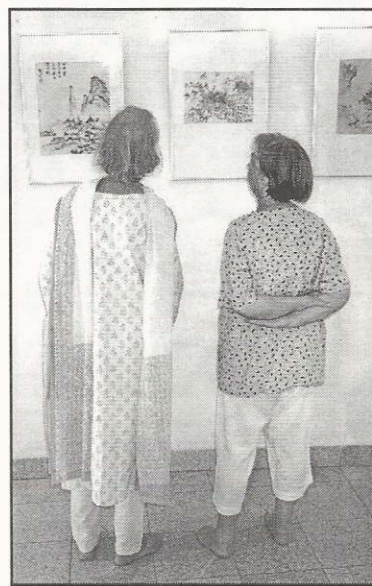
"Here are the paintings of a scholar who is at once an artist and a yogi"  
The Mother

## The brushwork of Hsu

Before I left Taiwan, I went to an art store to buy some brushes, ink stones and special rice paper. The shop keeper waved his hand over an endless assortment of boxes containing brushes. He raised his bushy black eyebrows as if to ask 'what kind of brush, young lady, is it you're looking for?' I scratched my head feeling rather stupid. One often ends up feeling rather stupid and unrefined when faced with the refinement and intricacy of Chinese painting. Walking through Hsu's exhibition of paintings so finely displayed in the Savitri Bhavan this week, I couldn't help thinking: the stone brush, the bamboo wide brush, the bamboo soft brush, the water brush, the mist brush, the flower brush, the rock brush, the bird brush, God! These Chinese have a brush for everything. And then I also couldn't help noticing the three main shades of ink. Chinese ink really doesn't come in a bottle. Or it does, but that's not how Hsu used it. It is ground on a fine ink stone that has a dip on one side of it. When a Chinese artist dips his brush into ink, it's first the darker thicker stuff, and then the watery stuff. Or the other way around. And then the shaded stroke. First more pressure with the whole brush pressed down for a darker effect, and then progressively, or

quite suddenly raise the brush for only the watery tip to end the stroke. I mean, what am I trying to do here? An expert would probably fill volumes with what it takes to be a Chinese painter. Everytime I see Chinese paintings, I'm left with the conviction that there is no finer manifestation of spirituality on paper. Humility fills my heart.

Ange



Sybille and Ursula admiring Hu Hsu's work

## The Salsa of the Soul

As part of an extensive worldwide tour, including West Africa "because the music, culture and ways of life of the people interested me so much," Ulli Revering and his former wife Ingrid visited Auroville in 1990. Since then, he has been spending a few months in Auroville almost each year. "Although I instantly felt a very strong connection to Auroville, I never had the guts to actually commit myself and settle down here. Today, though, things are different. I have changed and Auroville has changed..." In the near future, he may well stay on.

Ulli is by profession a music and sports teacher. He teaches singing, general music theory and practice. Says he: "My aim is that the children develop their soul through the music. It is an initiation point to come to unfold their own inner music." But he was never really interested in teaching in Germany because of the rigidity of the school system. He taught for some years in the United States, in an international boarding school in the high desert mountains of Arizona. "Although I've had some good experiences, all my teaching was like a compromise and I wasn't really satisfied. I think the only place in the world where I can really teach what I want to teach and share what I want to share is Auroville."

Since the early 1990s, Ulli works at the Christmas market of the east German port town of Rostock, where he sells goods from Auroville and India as well as fried bananas, reviving an old Rostock tradition from formerly socialistic times.

"But I felt lonely, not being in Auroville, not having that atmosphere around me." For some years, he worked with Auroville International Germany fundraising for Auroville projects, giving information on Auroville to those interested, and organizing yearly gatherings which some hundred and thirty people or so attended. He also helped form a group of around twenty people who met regularly for more than eight years, sharing personal experiences of Auroville and the Yoga.

Since being back in Auroville, Ulli has had a very busy schedule. He gives pranatic healing treatments at

Repos, is preparing a rock and blues concert of self-composed pieces also starring other Auroville musicians, and participates in the Auroville choir. "I like the idea of being involved and developing at a collective level your gifts and talents, to work it out together and present it to each other here. It's wonderful that there are so many people here who dance, play music, paint."

He also gives salsa dance classes three times a week, free of cost for Aurovilians and for Rs100 a class for guests, which goes to the Auroville Land Fund. Salsa is, above all else, Ulli's great passion. He has always loved dancing. He started dancing salsa and tango many years ago, eventually giving up tango "as it was too much focused on the mind. Salsa is joyful, innocent, fun. Once you start dancing, you just get carried away and don't even start thinking about anything else."

Salsa, originally from Puerto Rico, has developed many different styles and has spread first to other South American countries and then the world over. "Salsa is basically a mix, a 'melange', in which each person eventually develops his or her own style," says Ulli.

"Experiencing salsa is for me involving all aspects of the being. It's very complete, all chakras are involved. The movements reflect ones inner state, it goes very deep. Another aspect is the interaction, as it's a partner dance."

"The first time I came to Auroville, arriving by auto-rikshaw from Pondicherry, there was an instant click, an instant connection when I came face to face with the Matrimandir. It was almost physical, and so strong that this feeling never left me. Each time I returned, on approaching Auroville, I again felt this almost electric tension. It's almost comparable to what I feel when I hear good salsa music and feel the impulse to get up and dance; but instead of feeling the tension in my legs...I feel it in my soul."

Emmanuelle

## The Great Fire of Certitude

I'm not at my best around 3.30 am, which may explain why it took me some time to register what the voice outside was urgently trying to convey — "Come quickly, there's a big fire near the tennis courts!" It was Ellen, from nearby 'New Community', and it seemed she had been trying for some time to rouse me from my slumber.

As quickly as I could I pulled on some old jeans, thinking they might help minimize the heat from the inferno I imagined raging up the road, and save my skin from scorching; grabbed a torch, plus a garden rake from outside (the latter because it was the only thing I could think of with a long handle); and hastened up towards the tennis courts. As I approached the area I wondered if I had misheard Ellen: where were the roaring flames, the eucalyptus trees turned into 90 foot high torches,

the explosive sounds of trees cracking open in the searing heat? All I could see were a few figures with dim torches milling around in front of a medium size pile of burning leaves, the flames no higher than maybe 2-3 feet at most.

It was immediately clear that my imagination had run away with me, and we were not exactly fighting to save the 25 houses of Certitude, just to contain a small conflagration which had been working its way through the leaves for — we guessed — some 2-3 hours, occasionally sending up sizeable flames. No matter, it was a fire, and everyone seemed to be taking it seriously. Thomas was there from Gratitude — already up apparently, as he was awaiting his cow man — digging veritable tank traps with his mummy, as he put his formidable Herculean muscle-power into clearing

fire lanes through the leaf pile to stop the fire spreading further. Miriam was also there, heroically carrying a single small bucket to and fro from the sports wash point nearly 100 yards away, as she tried to dampen down the 15-20 sq.meters of flames and smouldering debris at the rate of one bucket every 2-3 minutes. Next I spotted Capability Landscape's chief executive, Francois, who seemed to be putting his landscaping skills into restructuring the leaf mound into two or three more aesthetic but definitely manageable piles. I also spotted Sanjeev, Nathalie and Andy, each doing their bit, but no-one else. The rest of Certitude was either away (our firebrand community accountant was in Bangalore at the time) or seemed to be still asleep around us, oblivious of how we were out there saving their homes, their possessions

and their very lives!! (The nearest resident never woke up throughout the whole event!)

Certitude is not the closest-knit of Auroville communities; in fact we're a funny old lot, who hadn't come together for a full community meeting of our 35+ residents since the late eighties. Now, for the first time in over a decade, we had a quorum, and it could have been a good time to discuss other matters. But, alas, at 4 am no-one seemed too enthusiastic, and so — after it was clear that the fire presented no further risk — we each wandered off back to our homes again, wondering whether it was worth trying to get more sleep or whether to call it a night and start our day. (I meanwhile also quietly wondered who had been out and about at 3 am to spot the fire? I later learned that it had been someone from outside the

community; who had woken one of the residents; who didn't know what to do; and so had woken Ellen; who in turn had started waking others around her.)

As I closed my front door, having decided I might as well start my day, I couldn't help feeling proud of my fellow Certitudinians — or were they Certitudinarians? Certitudinites? Certitudiniks? Certitudinilians? — and their achievement. Together, working as a superbly (un)coordinated team — The Magnificent Eight? — we had defeated 'The Great Fire of Certitude'! If any other community had a similar emergency, I surmised, at least they would now know to whom to turn.

(May this account please be taken by my fellow community members as the minutes of our once-in-ten-years meeting.)

Tim



# Masimagam

The day the gods are brought to the sea

I'm in Pondy, it's around seven pm and I want to go home, but can't. Hundreds and hundreds of bikes and motorbikes, scooters, buses, trucks, cars and what-have-you's are jammed together, packed in a thick thick dense compact throng, thrown together for some twenty minutes of living.

Although traffic jams have become a fairly normal event since Pondy's critical mass of residents has long been surpassed, this is a special one: The gods are moving.

Surrounded by all these revving (but not honking) vehicles, one sees big islands of light moving, slowly and grandly, in the rapidly darkening evening: they are large tractor-driven carts pulling behind them thundering power-supply generators and carrying on their main bodies. THE GODS. Richly adorned with gold and flowers and silk, and brought to life by brightly flashing multi-coloured lights and veiled by incense (and increasingly thick clouds of exhaust fumes), they float by, inch by inch, far beyond our mortal observers. And this time it's not only Ganesha, or only Ma Durga, as is the case during most festival days. No, it is ALL of them, inching onwards in great dignity, comradeship and splendour. Here I see a glimpse of Murugan, and there of Mariamman, and could that be Ma Lakshmi over there? Some of the larger carts even transport entire music ensembles and their drum beats are accelerating and accelerating, their flutes piping away, high above it all. Cacophony galores, vibes are mount-

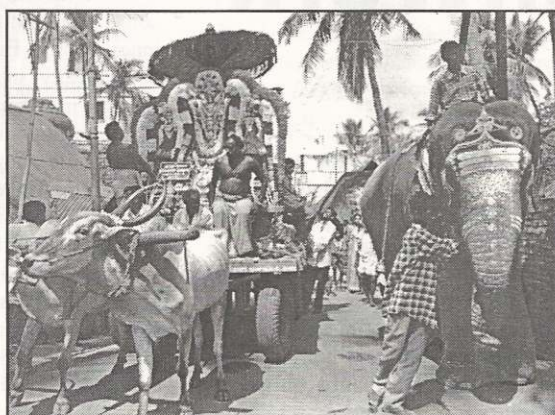
ing, this is instant, i-n-s-t-a-n-t India.

All these different beings moving together in one throng, millimeter by millimeter, and I feel completely at home. From time to time a temporary friendly neighbour (in the throng) tells me "YES YES, the gods. They are going to the sea, you see. Oh yes, they will contemplate the ocean". Nobody really knows why and nobody really cares, and I don't either. We're just hanging here together in our 'moving along with the gods' mode, and it's okay. It's just as it is. OF COURSE the gods go to the sea, this is evident, and OF COURSE we're all clubbed here together to be squeezed along with them on their path for some time. How else could it be?

I'm totally, totally and willingly taken up and captivated by the rather psychedelic happening. I find myself lost in watching fat wives yawning on the back of their hubby's small motorbikes with three kiddos waving heart-shaped balloons squeezed in between; the devotional temple music blasted from the carts, perfectly matched by the continual revving base sounds of the motorbikes; the eager hands and hearts of those (me included) who manage to touch one or more of the god-carts, reaching



PHOTOS SVEN



out for some vibhuti or sacred light; the raw real intensity of the contact moment of giving/receiving it; the high vibration of whipped-up but ever so natural devotion and love; and the open mouth of the little boy who has to guard a throbbing generator but who fell asleep on the machine itself.

As only resting-point there is, of course, the moon. The bright round clear full trusted moon, causing all this chaos and oneness — and contentedly following the procedure from above.

When I finally manage to emerge

from it all (although I didn't really want to, but I cannot but follow the thread of my life), I rode back home through the cool evening air, smiling and smiling, nay, BEAMING all the way — and marvelling at this amazing arrangement that Auroville, City of the Future, is coming forth in the midst of this god-loving mass.

OF COURSE it is!

Mauna

(First posted on an AVI electronic forum)

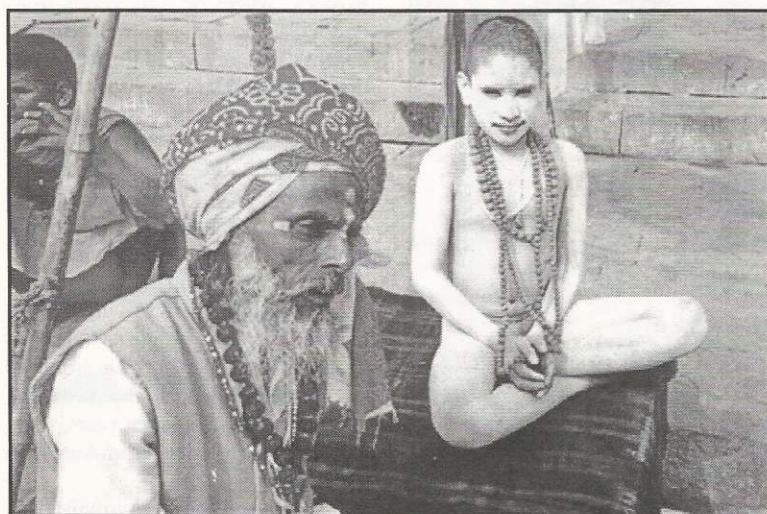
## Varanasi after the Kumbh Mela

The Kumbh Mela — the biggest Hindu festival in India — is like nothing else on earth...

The recent 'Maha' Kumbh Mela — considered the most astrologically auspicious for the past 144 years — drew an estimated 70 million people over 40 days to the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers near Ahmedabad. On one of the auspicious bathing days, as many as 17 million people bathed in the river.

As Fabian's slides showed during a recent presentation at the Centre for Indian Culture (CIC), this kumbh mela was remarkably well-organized. A vast tent city, 8 kilometres long, stretched along the riverbank, and the authorities had provided toilets, tent temples, STD booths, auditoria, even aluminium tracks so that the Tata Sumos with their up-market sadhus could drive grandly across the sand.

Franz arrived at the kumbh site after the final auspicious bathing day to encounter a landscape straight out of a Fellini film: most of the tents and people had gone and only a few giant statues of the gods could be seen in the distance, swimming in a mirage of heat. He journeyed on to Varanasi, to discover that all the sadhus, their followers and the media teams that had covered the kumbh had decamped



there to await the celebration of Siva Ratri. As the striking photographs in his recent exhibition at CIC showed, Varanasi during those days was full of the energy of the unexpected. On the steps of the ghats sadhus, nagas and other holy men and women mingled freely with local people and Western and Japanese tourists. The sadhus meditated, gave talks, smoked chillums, posed for photos, and created an atmosphere which, by turns, was comic, surreal and profound. And all the while the Ganges flowed serenely by, and the empty fields across the river stretched silent to the horizon...

Alan



PHOTOS FRANZ

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